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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MEXICO 003175

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CUBAN FM SIGNS MIGRATION MOU WITH MEXICO, RECEIVES
WARM WELCOME

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Charles V. Barclay.
Reason: 1.4 (b),(d).

¶1. (U) Summary. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque visited Mexico October 19-22 signing a bilateral migration accord and extending an invitation to President Calderon to visit Cuba. Both sides took pains to put behind them the ill will that characterized relations during the Fox administration and to welcome prospects for expanding cooperation, particularly on economic issues. Mexico's Senate offered Perez Roque a warm welcome by passing unanimously a motion calling on Mexico's Foreign Ministry to support the annual UN resolution that condemns the U.S. economic blockade on Cuba. PAN's President German Martinez affirmed his party would continue to promote greater respect for human rights in Cuba but not in a manner that would be seen as an imposition on Cuba. In responding to press queries during her own visit to Mexico this same week regarding a joint Cuban-Mexican declaration blaming U.S. policies for stimulating the flow of illegal Cubans through Mexico, Secretary Rice told journalists that Cuba's own repressive policies were responsible for compelling many of its own citizens to leave. End Summary.

Putting the Past Behind Them

¶2. (U) Genuine animosity characterized Cuban-Mexican relations throughout much of the Fox administration from 2000-2006. When former President Fox requested Fidel Castro to "eat and leave" in the course of a UN Development Summit in Monterrey in 2002, relations took a particular turn for the worse. In 2004, then PAN Deputy German Martinez referred to Cuba as "despotic" in the course of a debate in Congress. Both countries recalled their ambassadors just barely stepping back from the brink of breaking off relations.

¶3. (U) Perez Roque's warm reception this past week by contrast represents a concerted effort on the part of both sides to normalize relations. Senator Santiago Creel served as Fox's Secretary of Government when Mexico's relations with Cuba soured. However, when the two met at the Senate, Perez Roque made a point of shaking Creel's hand and announcing to the press that this gesture symbolized the mutual respect that now characterized Cuban-Mexican relations.

Tackling the Migration Problem

¶4. (U) Ostensibly, Perez Roque visited Mexico to sign an

MOU on migration matters with his counterpart from Mexico Secretary of Foreign Relations (SRE) Patricia Espinosa. Last year, Mexican authorities detained over 3,000 illegal Cubans; thus far in 2008, they have detained over 1,200. In recent years, Cuba has agreed to take back a mere fraction prompting the GOM to release most who then resume their trip north to the U.S. border. Under the terms of Cuba's MOU with Mexico, Cuba has agreed for the first time to take back not only those Cubans who entered Mexico illegally directly from Cuba but also those that enter via Central America. Secretary of Government Juan Mourino said the agreement would serve to create a framework for legal, safe, ordered, and safe migration. Perez Roque conveyed his government's commitment to implement the accord, notwithstanding some skepticism raised by a clause that allows Cuba to refuse taking back those migrants it regards as a "security or health" risk.

15. (C) As a condition for signing this agreement, Cuba insisted Mexico join it in blaming U.S. migration policies for "stimulating" this flow of Cubans through Mexico to the U.S. Mexico told us it refused to include such language in the MOU itself but agreed to make a public declaration to this end at the signature ceremony. Mexico, however, found itself in an uncomfortable position when Secretary Rice's visit was scheduled later in the same week of Perez Roque's trip to Mexico. Mexico took pains to explain to embassies its efforts to dilute the impact of its joining Cuba in criticizing U.S. policies toward Cuba. Perez Roque took advantage of available opportunities to foist blame on U.S. policies for Cuba's problems but also told the press that "despite everything, Cuba was looking to develop a new relationship with the U.S. based on respect."

Guess Who's Invited to Cuba?

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16. (C) Perez Roque had an hour long meeting with President Calderon during which he extended Calderon an invitation on behalf of Cuban President Raul Castro to visit Cuba. SRE officials told Deputy PolCouns that the President had accepted but that as his agenda into the coming year was quite full no date had yet been set. Calderon applauded Mexico's MOU with Cuba remarking it would expand security for both countries' citizens, reduce illegal immigration, and strengthen efforts to combat trafficking in persons. The President's communiqu  emerging from the meeting celebrated the reactivation of bilateral mechanisms between the two countries characterized by a spirit of mutual respect. Already, the two sides were benefiting from the process of normalization with an 80 percent increase in trade from January to August compared with the same period last year.

Making the Rounds

17. (U) Over the course of his visit, Perez Roque met with a variety of private groups including the Mexican business community, Mexican-Cuban solidarity groups, and members of the Cuban exile community. In his meeting with Perez Roque, Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard professed his "admiration" for the Cuban revolution and his respect for Cuba's "capacity to choose its own destiny." Perez Roque also held several meetings with Congressional groups including the Mexican Congress' steering committee and the executive committees of Mexico's major political parties. PAN President German Martinez -- the same German Martinez who described Cuba as "despotic" four years ago -- conveyed his view that Mexico should build a constructive relationship with Cuba looking to the future and not the past. He announced that he was prepared to visit Cuba and meet members of Cuba's Communist Party. He remarked to the press that while his party sought cordial relations with Cuba, it would not desist from promoting human rights and democracy, albeit in a way not perceived as an imposition on Cuba. Mexico's Senate used the occasion of Perez Roque's protocolary visit to interrupt its regular proceedings and adopt a unanimous motion calling upon

Mexico's SRE to support the UN resolution condemning the U.S. economic blockade of Cuba. (Note: Mexico has supported that resolution every year since its inception. End Note.)

Where Do They Go From Here?

18. (U) Beyond a desire to reactivate an Education and Cultural Commission, both sides stressed their commitment to expanding cooperation in the context of existing but long neglected mechanisms for economic cooperation including an Intergovernmental Commission and an Agreement for the Protection and Promotion of Investment. Mexico spoke of its desire to use the former to lower tariffs and expand trade. SRE officials told Deputy PolCouns that trade between Mexico and Cuba presently amounts to some \$250 million but Mexico would like to expand trade to \$1 billion. Given "unorthodox" Cuban business practices and some lingering concern about potential U.S. penalties, much of the Mexican business community remained reluctant to move quickly. Perez Roque insisted Cuba was open to investment and identified some areas such as tourism, energy, petroleum, and agriculture as particularly attractive.

19. (C) Comment. Mexican SRE officials suggested the U.S. view Mexico's efforts to normalize relations with Cuba in the context of initiatives on the part of the European Union and European Community to improve their relationship with Cuba. Mexico hopes its migration accord with Cuba will reduce the flow of illegal Cubans using Mexico as a bridge to the U.S. but recognizes Cuban compliance is hardly a foregone conclusion. Equally important, Mexico seeks to build on its strengthened relationship with Cuba to expand trade and investment with the island. Mexican officials insist human rights will remain a component in relations but also said Mexico intends to raise this matter in the context of shared multilateral commitments signaling clearly their intention to tread lightly.
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